

It is important that the co-operative work hard at devising a system that allows workers to easily meet and discuss problems they may be having with each other. Some co-operatives have worker councils, or regular staff meetings or staff sub-committees. Although co-operative workers generally solve staffing problems themselves, unresolved disputes can be referred to the directors.

DIRECTORS

Directors are elected by the membership to voluntarily perform the functions of a board of directors. The directors are legally responsible for functions such as the annual audit, insurance and taxation payments.

Apart from these legal responsibilities, the directors can take on a more dynamic role. If workers deal with the day to day running of the co-operatives this leaves the directors' meetings free to undertake long term planning, the discussion of new directions and potential community involvement.

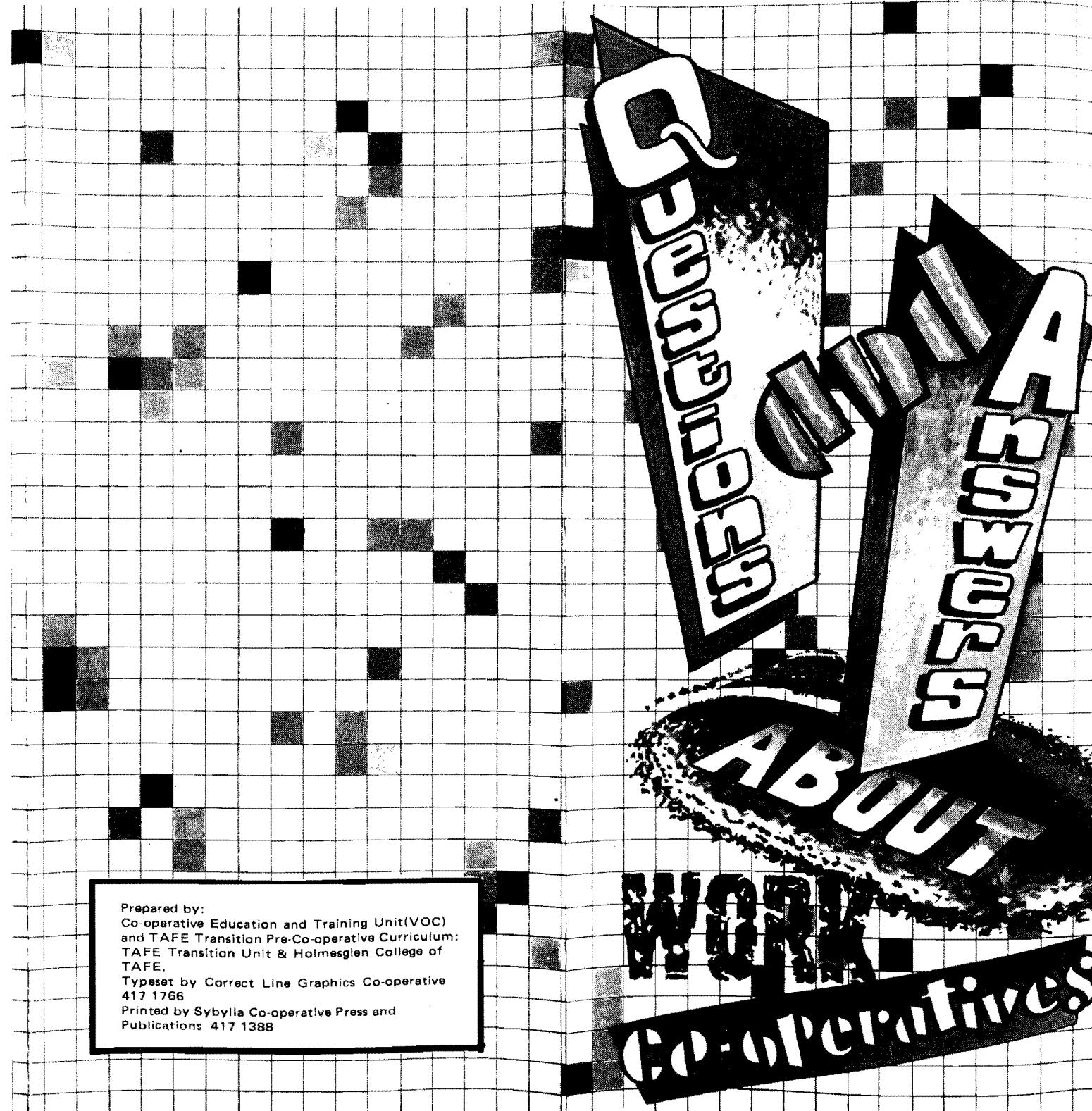
The composition of the board of directors is generally a mixture of workers, members of the local community and skilled advisers.

HOW ARE DECISIONS MADE?

Just as a traditional businesses attempt to allocate decision making, so do co-operatives. The difference is that within a co-operative, particularly a small one, there is more likely to be a greater sharing of, and equality in, decision making.

Decisions that are made regularly, e.g. purchase of materials, are best made by those people directly affected by the decisions - in this case the workers using the materials. In a co-operative this means that workers take responsibility for their own areas of production rather than deferring this power to a manager. More extraordinary decisions, e.g. the purchase of new equipment or the employment of a new worker need more participation and discussion. In a co-operative this is likely to take place at a regular workers' meeting (comparable to a meeting of managers). If the worker members feel the need for support or more input, or if non-worker members wish to be involved, then the directors' meeting provides the means for this to occur.

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WHERE DO WE GET THE MONEY TO START?

To set up or run a co-operative business you need enough money for rent, vehicles, equipment and wages plus money to cover early losses. Money is available from a variety of sources. Some co-operatives are established by members pooling resources eg. (60 members each putting in \$1,000), by taking out loans from banks, from taking large personal loans from interested (wealthy) people, by applying for government or charitable grants - or by any combination of the above. Obtaining finance is often one of the biggest problems facing co-operative members and one which must be overcome if the co-operative is to survive.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO JOIN A CO-OP?

Membership fees for co-operatives are usually low - often between \$2 - \$20. Some people buy lots of membership shares by way of making money available for the co-operative's use but they still only get one vote at co-operative meetings.

Most co-operative workers pay this membership fee when they start work so that they can have a vote at co-operative meetings. Some co-operatives extract what is known as an "equity payment" from workers, that is the workers gradually buy into their co-operative business.

AS A MEMBER WHAT DO I DO?

Membership of the co-operative can be made up simply of the workers involved in it can include non-working shareholders or members. If the latter option is taken up, this can provide the co-operative with financial and human resources that a more restricted shareholding cannot supply.

Non worker members, like worker members, can provide finance in the form of shareholdings and they can act as guarantors if the co-operative is taking out a loan.

Of course there could be conflict between worker and non-worker members especially if the group has not clarified the roles members will play in the co-operative.

Members can also provide advice to, and share skills with, the worker members. Often members have valuable business or social contacts to offer.

AS A WORKER, HOW INVOLVED DO I HAVE TO BE?

As a worker, you are involved in the production of your co-operative goods and services. This is every worker's basic involvement, but for most co-operative workers there is more.

Greater control over your workplace, who you work with and what you produce does mean the taking on of certain responsibilities traditionally allocated to management. Put simply, being a co-operative worker means taking as much interest as possible in the co-operative work. It means that you are given, and take, the chance to understand the options that the co-operative may have in the future, and that you learn how to work with your fellow members in a way which is conducive to group decision making.

Some of the benefits of being involved are - a greater control over your own work, involvement, and sometimes control over, the hiring and firing of yourself and your workmates, access to financial records, and the gaining of a greater variety of skills than you may acquire in a traditional workplace.

HOW DO I LEARN IN A CO-OPERATIVE?

Learning the issues of co-operation normally comes from within the group. It is up to the group to devise ways of making the co-operative run smoothly. An acceptable principle of co-operation is that of education. Therefore, most co-operatives make an effort to increase their knowledge of co-operative issues.

IS THERE ANY ON THE JOB TRAINING?

Yes, co-operatives are committed to education and training. Often they will train people to do jobs they may not have done before. Some groups rotate jobs to allow everyone to learn all jobs, some groups have highly skilled workers in some areas who teach their skills to less trained workers,

HOW MUCH DO I GET PAID IN A CO-OPERATIVE?

Co-operatives, like traditional business, are bound to pay award wages to workers. The amount you get paid normally depends on your age, qualifications, and the type of work you do. Some co-operatives have a policy of paying overaward wages or of evening out wages by paying overaward payments to those on small wages and keeping the higher levels on normal awards. Other co-operatives follow a policy of pooling and dividing wages.

WHAT ARE WORKING CONDITIONS LIKE?

Co-operatives are subject to the same laws as any businesses. They must provide a safe working environment. Whilst the physical work environment is comparable to work environments in any business, the structure of the workforce is more flexible.

ARE CO-OPERATIVE WORKERS MEMBERS OF TRADE UNIONS?

There is still a deal of misunderstanding on both sides about the role of Trade Unions in co-operatives. Some confusion stems from issues such as co-operative employees being, in some cases, their own employers. It is important to remember that the working conditions and award wages which are part of the co-operative mode of operating, were fought for and won by Trade Union action. It is as important for co-operative workers as it is for workers in any business to become members of the Trade Union relevant to their job. Many Trade Unions are still unclear about where co-operatives fit into the industrial arena. It is only through co-operative members joining Trade Unions that greater understanding can develop – to the benefit of both.

TO WHOM ARE WORKERS ACCOUNTABLE?

As in all work places, it is your fellow workers who know best how involved you are, how happy you are at work and what you best like doing. In a co-operative this direct knowledge of each other's abilities and personalities forms the basis for any decisions that are made at worker or director meetings regarding individual workers.